

## Improving Europe's China competence: on the significance of China competence for German and European policy on China

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# SWP Comment

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## Improving Europe's China Competence

On the Significance of China Competence for German and European Policy on China

Andrea Frenzel and Nadine Godehardt

**Dealing with China is not only about finding answers to urgent problems in politics, business, or technology. Rather, a system of European China competence must be established that ensures long-term capacity for action. It is crucial to locate this task at the nexus of foreign and education policy. The development of China competence through education should therefore be part of Europe's China strategy.**

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, attitudes towards the Chinese government under Xi Jinping had already changed considerably in Germany and Europe. A meaningful example of this is the European Commission's *Strategic Outlook* of 12 March 2019, which no longer describes China as a developing country, but as a key global player and leading technological power. The European Commission emphasises that although China is a cooperation and negotiation partner as well as an economic competitor, it is also a systemic rival, primarily because of its government model.

During the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, this critical attitude towards China has increased significantly in politics, the press, and the think tank community. It is linked to growing doubts about Beijing's political credibility. This has not only been fuelled by the decision of the National People's Congress to pass the national security law for Hong Kong at the end of May 2020, but also by a whole series of political events. Criticism of the actions of the Chi-

nese authorities at the beginning of the Wuhan pandemic is particularly pronounced.

On the one hand, China's economic significance for Germany and Europe is increasing. On the other hand, however, there is growing uncertainty about the global activities of Chinese actors and the increasingly complex thematic contexts in dealing with China. The combination of the two has long revealed that more China competence is indispensable. The German government already responded to this realisation with the (now expired) "China Strategy of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) 2015–2020". However, the measures developed in this strategy primarily concern science and research. It is true that 11 interesting interdisciplinary projects have been developed at German universities since 2016 within the framework of one funding measure. But the question remains as to what extent these funding lines can develop "a broader China competence in Germany".



## Nexus of Foreign and Education Policy

Education and foreign policy are natural allies in developing China competence. In this context, it is therefore not productive to consider them separately. However, the federal structure of the education system in Germany must always be taken into account when promoting China competence, because the ministries of education and culture of the *Länder* (federal states) are the key to implementation. The first promising approaches to cooperation have already been made. A joint initiative by the BMBF, the Federal Foreign Office, and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* was launched in 2017. It supported the study “China kennen, China können” (2018), which was the first comprehensive survey of China competence in Germany. The study not only focused on science and research, but also on the current state of school education, which is at least as important as university-level education for a strategic approach. The “Working Group on China Competence in Schools and Education” was associated with the aforementioned initiative. Based on the findings of the study, it developed recommendations for implementation in the two main types of schools in Germany: general and vocational. At the end of 2019, a civil society actor, Stiftung Mercator, with the support of the initiative partners, set up an education network to promote China competence in schools. Areas of focus are Chinese language instruction, China as a subject topic in classes, and student exchange.

The question now is how to proceed, and whether the efforts for more China competence should become much more strategic, and above all transnational. A deeper understanding of China requires even more direct and indirect engagement with the country. Only then will it be possible to develop effective instruments and a self-confident attitude that is based on reciprocity. The foundations for the promotion of China competence must be laid not

only at universities and in centres of excellence, but also in society as a whole, and they must be anchored in the national – and especially the European – education sector. Without an intensive Europe-wide development of China competence across all sectors, it will not be possible to differentiate between relations with China as a partner, competitor, and rival in Germany and, above all, in Europe in the long term.

## Capacity for Action through China Competence

China competence in politics has a different focus than in economic or technological contexts. However, all variants are ideally based on a good command of the language, sound knowledge and expertise of China, and the ability to communicate intercultur-ally.

Firstly, China competence stands for the ability to apply knowledge about China to a whole range of situations and to place specific problems in the broader context of policy on China. For example, experience in the economic sector with China usually remains sector-specific and is therefore not generally transferable to other areas. Secondly, intercultural competence is a necessary requirement to engage in dialogue, especially under conditions of systemic competition. This should not be equated with mastering a bag of tricks or business etiquette, but above all includes the ability to reconstitute the horizon of interpretations in recognising the differences between the systems. A detailed look, for example, at the complex political functioning of the state and party apparatus protects both against the influence of propaganda campaigns and the oversimplified friend–foe scheme of “innocent” Chinese people on the one hand, and “cunning” party officials on the other. This helps in seeing things objectively and finding solutions that do justice to the complexities of German-Chinese and European-Chinese relations and can also counteract growing levels of mistrust.

Thirdly, China competence must start with school education. University studies and vocational training as well as appropriately supported student exchange programmes can create well-founded China competence. These approaches are valuable, but they alone hardly contribute towards anchoring China expertise in society on a broad level. The number of first-year students in Chinese studies has been declining for years – in 2016/17 the number was around 500 in Germany, even though there are more and more courses of study being offered in contemporary Chinese studies. The development is similar in the United Kingdom, for example. Vocational education and training in Germany currently does not offer any additional Chinese-related qualifications with language training that goes beyond a basic level.

### **School Education As a Cornerstone of China Competence**

The development of China competence must start with school education. Secondary-level education lends itself to this purpose. Intercultural competence is the key objective of Chinese lessons at school. In recent years it has been expanded structurally, albeit not significantly in terms of numbers. Here, precisely those skills are taught that are needed in Germany and Europe on a much broader societal basis: language skills (up to a level of independent language use if the course is of an appropriate duration) and substantial socio-cultural orientational knowledge about China. However, the number of pupils attending Chinese courses in schools has remained low for years – around 5,000. By contrast, some 7 million pupils in general education schools in Germany learn English (the universal *lingua franca*), 1.4 million French, and as many as 464,000 Spanish. Hardly any use has been made so far of the potential of specialised instruction to teach the approximately 5.3 million secondary school pupils in Germany about China, for exam-

ple in the subjects of politics, geography, economics, or history.

Last but not least, China competence in the school education sector must be developed financially and ideologically independent of the Chinese state. Linguistic and cultural offerings from the Chinese side – in the sense of a cultural foreign policy, as pursued by Germany and many other countries – should be welcomed as a supplement. However, European nations must claim responsibility for “basic education” themselves. Not only that: In solidarity with European Union (EU) member states, this basic education should be implemented and financed at the European level, for example by setting up a “European Education Fund for Chinese Literacy”. In this respect, too, European robustness cannot be developed by Germany alone, but through cooperation at the European level. European countries that are financially weaker are often not even able to offer chairs of sinology or language instruction at universities, let alone Chinese lessons in schools.

Even though a complete inventory of the existing China competence in Europe is not yet available, there is likely at present not a single European country that can provide adequate educational opportunities with respect to China through its own national responsibility. In the medium term, this deficit will impair Europe’s capacity to act autonomously with regard to China.

### **A European Education Initiative for China Competence**

Ultimately, therefore, it is not enough to focus solely on Germany in this matter. “China” has long since arrived in Europe and is becoming increasingly assertive and self-confident. This is why Europe is looking for a common stance and a “more robust European strategy”, as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell recently emphasised. Consequently, promoting China competence is a challenge not only for Germany, but for Europe as a whole – whether in economic

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or political negotiations, diplomacy and information-gathering, or in order to counter propaganda and disinformation. Even in the United States, the lack of China competence — and the dangers that may arise from this — are currently being discussed.

Without the establishment of a sustainable, Europe-wide China competence system and intensive promotion of it, there will be a lack of expertise on China in the foreseeable future. However, a European education initiative for China competence as part of Europe's China strategy cannot, and should not, start with standards and binding structures, because education policy is the domain of the individual member states. However, the EU already has a broad-based education platform with elements on which a China competence initiative could be based, for example the EU policy of multilingualism. Existing popular programmes such as Erasmus+ also do not limit the sovereignty of individual countries.

A first sub-package should include the following fields of action: information, networking of actors, and intensive dialogues on China education in Europe with examples of good practice. The long-overdue assessment of Chinese language instruction in schools and universities throughout Europe should be part of this component. A few years ago, a project group of language experts from various European countries, funded by the European Commission, worked on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its applicability to the Chinese language. A similar project could serve the networking and exchange of information on Chinese language instruction at the European level and develop viable structures for this purpose.

The content of a second sub-package should be to design, implement, and evaluate concrete offers with regard to educational and curriculum development and exchange formats. Conceivable, for example, are cooperations in which mixed groups of

European students travel to China, and then in return meet with Chinese students in individual European countries. This model already works in a similar way for providers of individual exchanges, but it could be expanded considerably as part of an integrated EU project. Both packages together can establish a European education initiative for China competence and thus contribute towards strengthening the cohesion of the EU and towards advancing European autonomy in dealing with China.

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